

With cherry trees, a tradition takes root

Howard County aspires to rival D.C.'s celebrated blossoms

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George Washington may be known for cutting down a cherry tree, but Howard County doesn't think his namesake city should monopolize the flowering trees' brilliant spring display.

In a ceremony at Centennial Park in Ellicott City yesterday, Howard County Tourism planted 20 cherry trees purchased by community leaders, businesses and individuals. It was the first step in an effort to plant 1,000 cherry trees throughout the county over the next few years.

Organizers hope the project will beautify local communities, raise money for charity and establish the county as a place to view cherry blossoms each year.

When County Executive James N. Robey spoke at Howard County Tourism's annual meeting in September, he said the project was "a vision out of which a new unique, countywide spring celebration may take shape, one that may ultimately become a signature event for Howard County and maybe even the state."

Rachelina Bonacci, executive director of Howard County Tourism, said people will want to come see Howard's trees much as they are drawn to the trees that line the Tidal Basin in Washington.

The first 3,000 of the Washington trees were a gift from Yukio Ozaki, mayor of Tokyo, in 1912. An additional 3,800 were given in 1965. More than 700,000 people visit Washington each year to see the blossoms, which usually last about 10 days, according to the National Cherry Blossom Festival.

Bonacci said the Kwanzan cherry trees being planted in Howard County should bloom two weeks later than the trees in Washington and offer more pink blossoms in contrast to the many white ones in the capital.

She said the trees in Howard County will captivate observers when winter begins to give way to warm weather.

"It's that promise of something new," she said.

The Howard County Cherry Blossom Project's 20 inaugural trees were sold for \$1,000 each.

The trees, which were grown at Town Creek Nursery in Clarksville, cost about \$275 each, said John Byrd, chief of the county's Bureau of Parks and Program Services. Organizers plan to get all of the cherry trees from county growers.

From the sale of each tree, \$500 went to the Howard County Hospital Foundation for the Claudia Mayer Cancer Resource and Image Center, which offers a free library and salon to cancer patients.

The rest of the funds from the founding trees will support the continuation of the blossom project.

The first tree was purchased by Rae Lapine of Columbia in honor of her first husband, Howard L. Millman, who died of cancer in 1990.

Yesterday, Lapine helped shovel dirt over the roots of the tree and tied a pink ribbon to its branches. After the ceremony, several of her friends and family members - including her 6-year-old grandson, Adam Howard Popp - added a few more scoops of dirt to honor Millman.

Lapine said the tree was a perfect memorial for Millman, an associate professor at University of Maryland, Baltimore County and clinical psychologist to whom she was married for 23 years.

"He was a girlie man and proud of it," she told those who attended the dedication ceremony. "He loved flowers and children and people."

Another tree was bought by a group of 36 people in honor of Ann Moon of Ellicott City, who is fighting breast cancer.

Moon, who retired from the county school system three years ago, said she has been walking in Centennial Park since it opened and is excited to see the newest additions.

"I was thrilled, really thrilled," she said of her friends' gift.

Regina Ford of Columbia, a former president of the tourism council and one of the organizers of Moon's gift, told the audience, "We have tremendous respect for Ann for the struggle she has put up for 14 years."

Ford said when she started talking to Moon's friends, "Everyone bought into it immediately. It's a double-whammy. It makes the county beautiful ... and it serves the [Claudia Mayer] center."

Organizers hope to get many more individuals and businesses to sponsor plantings for parks, road medians, businesses, neighborhoods and other locations.

The tourism council plans to offer the next trees for less than \$1,000, but has not set a price scale.

The tourism council has focused much of its effort on promoting Howard County's historical sites, such as the B&O Railroad Museum, and offering ghost tours in historic Ellicott City and Savage Mill in Savage. This is the first time the group has tried to create a new attraction.

"It's an exciting step," Bonacci said. "It's another way to successfully market the county."

She told the audience at the dedication that the trees "are part of something we hope will be in the ground for your grandchildren to see."

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